Irish-American trade, 1660–1783

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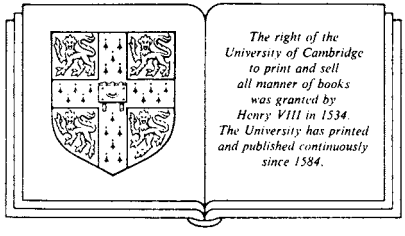

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Introduction

Before 1731, Ireland's trade with the British plantations in America was confined to the export of provisions, horses, linens, and servants. By a revision in the British Acts of Navigation in that year, a two-way commerce was established that became a model of intercolonial trade within the first British Empire. Although narrow in scope, compared to the plantation commerce of the mother country, it employed trading patterns, financial mechanisms, and mercantile services that were fully integrated into the imperial system. Ireland's proximity to Great Britain fostered tight controls, however. British navigation legislation, in spite of its restrictive and often myopic character, structured activity that was appropriate to the level of economic development in Ireland and America. From the third quarter of the seventeenth century, for example, the West Indian sugar islands found their principal source of salted beef and butter in the agricultural surpluses of Ireland. The trade in Irish salted provisions depended heavily on English intermediaries, most of whom were associated with the London sugar interest. And North American flaxseed, an article traded almost exclusively to Ireland, was perhaps the most important of the goods produced in New England and the Middle Colonies for shipment direct to the British Isles. That trade, likewise, benefited from the involvement of merchants in Great Britain typically linked to the Irish linen industry.

In many important ways, there was little to distinguish mercantile life in Ireland from that in British America. Merchants in both places shared a common language, common navigation laws, common financial mechanisms (particularly with regard to a common dependence upon London), and a common set of service institutions. To an experienced sea captain, other than the fact that Ireland contained ports vastly larger than any in North America, the most striking difference between the two sides of the Atlantic was the greater vigilance of Irish customs officers.[1] For most participants, Irish-American commerce was not a self-contained activity, but rather one element of a complex set of relationships rooted in the trading environment of the North Atlantic. In its simplest form, transatlantic trade within the first British Empire centered on the movement of tropical and semi-tropical staples (sugar, tobacco, rice, and indigo) from the plantation colonies of the West Indies and the North American mainland to Great Britain, where they were exchanged, together with earnings

generated in the mainland's commerce with the Caribbean and other peripheral trades, for an array of English manufactured articles and specialty foodstuffs. The Acts of Navigation also countenanced an important commerce with "southern Europe" (the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean area) and the Spanish and Portuguese wine islands (Madeira, the Azores, and the Canary Islands) in which colonial fish was traded for wine and salt. Late in the colonial period, the trade to southern Europe expanded dramatically as the region began to take large quantities of wheat, flour, Indian corn, and rice directly from the mainland colonies. In addition to these commodity trades, British commerce in the Atlantic provided for the westward movement of vast numbers of passengers and indentured servants from the British Isles and the European continent, as well as multitudes of enslaved blacks from the Guinea coast of Africa.[2] To some degree, Irish-American trade figured in all of these activities.

Trade between Ireland and the American colonies was essentially intercolonial commerce, with activities of both partners carefully structured to serve the interests of the mother country. In a mercantile frame of reference, the British Empire was like a wheel, with England, the metropolitan center, located at the hub and the colonies on the rim. Ideally, trade moved up and down the spokes, but it might move along the rim as well.[3] "Considering Ireland therefore as a colony," as did Edward Long of Jamaica, an astute contemporary observer, Ireland occupied, along with the American colonies, a position on the rim of the wheel.[4] That Ireland and the British plantations shared a common colonial status was not widely perceived, however. In Ireland, the rhetoric of ascendancy indulged the illusion of semi-independence.[5] Her Anglo-Irish elite, her large and developed cities, and her immediate physical proximity to Great Britain suggested partnership rather than subordination. But to contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic, eighteenth-century Ireland's place in the imperial scheme of things was uncertain and often muddled. According to one view expressed on the floor of the Irish House of Commons, Ireland was "an ancient kingdom, great in its own growth, entrenched behind an ancient constitution, co-equal and coeval with England."[6] The other extreme, equally blind but considerably more popular, held that Ireland was the long-standing victim of British commercial legislation designed to bring ruin to her agriculture, manufactures, and trade. "The whole kingdom does not fit out so many merchant ships as belong to any one of the considerable ports of England or America," wrote a critic of British policy in Ireland in the 1770s. "Industry does but crawl through the land," he added.[7]

In reality, Ireland experienced periods of vigorous economic growth between 1660 and 1783. The years after 1731 were characterized by peace

and relative prosperity, with rising population (reaching somewhere between 3 million and 3.5 million by 1770)[8] and growth in Irish towns and cities, especially those active in overseas commerce. Although there were occasional harvest failures, particularly in the famine years 1739–41,* the performance of Irish agriculture was good by contemporary European standards.[9] Foreign trade flourished, fueled by expansion in the linen manufacture of the north and the continued success of the salted-provisions industry, particularly at Cork. Both of these activities combined Ireland's capacity to produce agricultural surpluses with a sophisticated level of commercial organization. With the growth of trade, and a rising dependence upon Great Britain, came increased interdependence between Ireland and other constituent parts of the British Empire. By the middle of the eighteenth century, it had become widely perceived in Ireland that the health of the domestic economy had become inextricably linked to foreign trade. "As the Wealth and People of England increase, and the American Plantations improve, our Manufacture will feel the Benefit," wrote an Irish pamphleteer in 1749.[10] In spite of improving circumstances, however, there were deep divisions in the Irish nation. The suppression of the Roman Catholics and the frustration of Ireland's full economic development by shortsighted British policy left important elements in the population bitter, resentful, and disaffected.[11]

The sugar islands of the British West Indies and the mainland colonies of North America provided two distinct zones of activity for Irish-colonial commerce. In the first, the islands of Jamaica, Barbados, St. Christopher, Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, Grenada, Dominica, St. Vincent, and Tobago made up the principal Caribbean holdings of the first British Empire. With a combined area of 5,502 square miles, their total population numbered about 469,500 (44,100 whites and 425,400 black slaves) by 1770. Although there were differences in climatic conditions, topography, and soil quality from island to island, the region's economy was dominated by a single economic theme: sugar. By 1775, sugar imports into England and Wales totaled nearly 2 million hundredweight, four times the level reached at the turn of the century. After the middle years of the seventeenth century, economic regimes dedicated to the near-exclusive production of sugar frustrated the development of balanced and self-sustaining societies in the English Caribbean. In each of the islands, large numbers of enslaved blacks supplied the bulk of the labor required by the highly disciplined plantation agriculture. For most of the white population, the West Indies were primarily

*A note on dates: Years joined by a dash, such as 1739–41, indicate a span of time that includes part or all of consecutive twelve-month periods, each ending 31 December. Years linked by a slash, such as 1739/40, indicate an Irish fiscal year ending 25 March, or "Lady Day" (see Appendix II).

a pathway to material wealth, however illusory. The English, Scots, and Irish who freely settled there came to exploit opportunities, not to build lasting societies. Their narrow materialism is underscored by the chronic absenteeism of the planter class.[12]

In the Caribbean, Irish-American trade focused on the exchange of salted provisions for sugar and other island produce, most of which was carried to London and the English outports. From the outset of trade in the mid-seventeenth century, Ireland exported large quantities of beef, butter, pork, and herrings to the English Caribbean, along with an array of other articles, such as pickled tongues, bread, cheese, beer, and candles. In fact, Irish agriculture and its associated provisioning industries benefited more directly from demand in the islands than did their counterparts in England. Merchants in London and the English outports, among whom Irish interests were well represented, managed most of this trade, as well as the huge sugar reexport to Ireland. Although the commerce to the West Indies began to meet stiff competition from the mainland colonies about the turn of the eighteenth century, Irish provisions remained a significant element in the foodstuffs import of the English Caribbean. In addition to her provisions export, Ireland shipped large quantities of low-priced linens to the islands to clothe the black slave population.

The British possessions on the North American continent constituted the second zone of activity for Irish-colonial trade. By 1770, the mainland colonies, with a total population of about 2,268,000 (1,808,000 whites and 460,000 blacks),[13] had formed into four regional groupings: New England (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire), together with Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and, after 1763, Quebec; the Middle Colonies (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware); the Upper South or Chesapeake colonies (Virginia and Maryland); and the Lower South (North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and, after 1763, East and West Florida). In contrast to the West Indies, mainland North America offered broad opportunity, with cheap land, an endemic shortage of labor, and high social and economic mobility.[14] Her attractiveness to European immigrants, many of whom were Irish, was one important factor contributing to the general expansion that took place in the period. But even with rapid growth, the colonial economies remained relatively less developed than Ireland until after the American Revolution.[15] There was an active commercial life, but no level of industrial organization comparable to that found in the Irish provisions and linen trades. Except for the Upper and Lower South, a region of large plantations and black slave labor, colonial agriculture was characterized by small independent farmers, free of the landlord-tenant relationships common to Ireland and other European economies. Rising population and income in America knitted the colonial economies to the early phase of

the Industrial Revolution. As the colonial farmer emerged from subsistence in the half-century before 1775, he increasingly offered his surpluses to a market that drew in the manufactures of the British Isles. Heightened demand for imported manufactured articles stimulated merchants to exploit aggressively opportunities to earn exchange credits abroad.[16]

On the North American continent, Irish commercial interests were concentrated at Philadelphia, New York, and, to a lesser degree, Baltimore, where vigorous expatriate Irish merchant communities had formed by 1750. In addition to a modest provisions trade to the mainland seaports, North America provided the principal vent outside the British Isles for Ireland's huge production of low-priced coarse linens. After 1743, those cloths typically moved through English ports, collecting a bounty upon their reexportation to the plantations. The indirect linen trade utilized channels of distribution that benefited from the financing and convenient shipping available through English intermediaries. Also during the 1740s, North America emerged as Ireland's principal source of imported flaxseed, an article that became indispensable to the Irish linen industry. The flaxseed trade was encouraged by Irish legislation authorizing payment of a 5s. (sterling) bounty on each hogshead* of imported foreign seed. Concentrated between the months of November and February, this activity accounted for nearly all of the shipping that moved directly from the North American mainland to Ireland. In addition to its principal lading, the annual flaxseed fleet carried barrel staves, lumber, and iron, as well as significant quantities of wheat and flour, particularly in years of crisis. Westbound flaxseed ships transported large numbers of passengers, convicts, and indentured servants to the ports of the Middle Colonies in one of history's great overseas migrations.

From the perspective of Ireland, trade with the plantations in America offered immediate access to an expanding transatlantic economy. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the rapid growth of Ireland's provisioning capacity, largely fed by demand from the Caribbean, was one of the chief stimulants to the development of her principal seaports and market towns. During the same years, the nation's huge import of tobacco, brought in through England after 1685, helped to draw vast numbers of Irish into a market-oriented economy.[17] After the middle of the eighteenth century, the substantial export of low-priced linens to the American market allowed Ireland to participate in the rapidly growing market for manufactured goods within the British Empire that marked a preliminary stage of the Industrial Revolution. The direct connection of Irish-colonial trade to sources of English capital and credit likewise stimulated development in

*A hogshead of flaxseed contained approximately 7 bushels, but the exact amount varied.

Ireland. As an outcome of the role of English financing in both the provisions and linen exports, Irish commercial interests in London were dramatically strengthened. Among the great London banking houses of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were firms with a distinct Irish character, a number of them with links to the West Indies and the American continent. Partly as a result of intimate connections with the English capital, financial and banking services in Dublin reached a higher stage of development than anywhere else in the empire outside of London.[18]

From the perspective of the American colonies, the relationship between the Irish linen and provisioning industries and London financing made commerce with Ireland particularly attractive. The trade provided colonial merchants a convenient means of earning sterling bills of exchange with which to fund imports of British manufactures for a market growing in size as well as purchasing power. This was particularly true after passage of the Sugar Act by the British Parliament in the mid-1760s, which reduced earnings in the mainland's West Indian trade, the principal activity carried on from ports in New England and the Middle Colonies. Little produced outside the southern plantation colonies was salable in the British Isles other than flaxseed, staves, lumber, ships, potash, and wheat and flour, all of which found good markets in Ireland. The Irish import that had the most dramatic effect upon the colonial economy was low-priced linen cloth. The article was distributed throughout the American plantations, particularly after the mid-1740s, where it discouraged the development of a domestic linen manufacture capable of meeting the growing demands of an expanding economy. The import allowed the focus of colonial resources on agriculture, the most productive activity in a region of abundant, cheap, and fertile land.